'Translanguaging' a harbinger of language and cultural loss in Africa? The central role of schools in the transmission of standard forms of African languages.

Michel Lafon

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LINGUISTICS AND THE GLOCALISATION OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:

A FESTSCHRIFT

IN HONOUR OF

PROF. KỌLA OWOLABI

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6 'Translanguaging': A Harbinger of Language and Cultural Loss in Africa? The Central Role of Schools in the Transmission of Standard Forms of African Languages

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Abstract
Assuming that developing children's knowledge of their own language and culture is an essential part of education, and that formal education framed on the western model premised on literacy is becoming universal across the global South, the author, with (South) Africa in mind, challenges the glorification of hybrid linguistic practices which go under the recently coined catch term of translanguaging. Because translanguaging may often sanction neglect, or undermining, of standard African languages, he questions what is meant, or implied, by the notion of 'knowing a language', and hence, what is to be taught (assuming that something is) relative to it in the post-colonial school. He argues that, combined with the global trend which posits English as *the* language and similarly the western societal model as a universal goal, this is a sure recipe for a new wave of language shift and cultural loss, with Africa, again, at the receiving end. As a counter-fire, he advocates an equitable high level approach to literacy in multilingual contexts in the South, whether the languages are mainstream or peripheral, whether they enjoy high or low status, as a condition for self-centred development as an alternative to espousing alien agendas to foster a future that is truly of the communities' own making.
Key words: translanguaging, language shift, cultural loss, hybrid linguistic practices

Introduction

Translanguaging emerged as a powerful concept to depict situations in multilingual classrooms which have become emblematic of schools in today's global world (see Plüddemann 2011 for a short synopsis). Drawing on the ambiguous fascination in this age, things, presumably in-between translanguaging has fast become the new darling of the alternative discourse on language in education. If it follows from its acceptance as a

legitimate practice in school that it is an end in itself, this may prove detrimental to linguistic and cultural transmission in Africa,[1] now that schools, for better for or worse, are fast becoming the only locus of formalized education.[2] This emphasizes the importance of teaching (so-called) standard or classical forms of African languages which command access to the cultural wealth of many ethnic or language groups inasmuch as they remain the genuine media through which it is expressed and stored in the collective memory. This is of special concern for self-centred development to be attained.

Multilingualism as a feature of the postcolonial school

Due to its fascinating diversity in learners' linguistic backgrounds the postcolonial school, both in countries of the periphery, especially Africa, and in countries of the centre (or global North, or West) has raised intense scholarly interest. Most of the former have perforce or perchance adopted as medium of instruction (MoI) a language originally alien to them, at best an L2[3] whereas the latter have been the target of large movements of population from the first group, multiplying minorities within their inner borders.[4] In either context and even further, schools have, therefore, "increasingly become sites of multilingualism and identity negotiations" (Basu 2011:1309 à propos Canada).[5] The strategy of linguistic assimilation which ignored local languages in favour of the sole use and recognition of the (colonial) country's national idiom, and was (and remains) largely practised in mainland France and Portugal, further extended to their overseas territories and ingrained there as an ambiguous legacy,[6] has been questioned on two main grounds: i) pedagogy, to facilitate learning, and ii) politics/ ideology, to ensure maintenance of language and hence, if in a somewhat nuanced fashion, of culture.[7] Approaches more friendly to linguistic diversity, including home language maintenance among minorities' children in countries of the centre and initial (usually three to four years) mother-tongue literacy in former colonized African countries, have been experimented within the

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1 In an education context, transmission posits language as (also) contents. It is preferred here to 'maintenance' because it does not pre-empt any attitude towards what is transmitted, which may be kept, adapted, transformed or, even, discarded.

2 All societies had forms of education of the youth. In Africa, that often implied the initiation that marked the transition to adulthood (see Ocitti 1994 for example in East Africa). All these practices implied language learning.

3 Whether the MoI is a foreign or a second language depends widely on social and individual circumstances.

4 For European multilingualism, see "Multilingual cities project" (Extra/ Yagmur 2004, quoted in Hélot 2008:57).

5 This wording seeks to include, beyond former colonized countries, others in the non-western world which were never under formal British or American domination but where a growing number of schools are using English as partial or sole MoI , as well as schools in non-English speaking Western countries which in recent years have similarly gone the English route.

6 In spite of recent regulations affording space for a variety of minority languages, the French monolingual habitus remains prevalent in the country's education system (see Hélot 2008). For the admission of multilingualism in 'Lusophone' countries, see Carta de Maputo (http://www.iilp.org.cv/), subsequent to a meeting held in 2011.

7 Culture-wise, this often translates in a mere folklorisation of selected 'exotic' (viz. non-western) aspects.

framework of an alternative discourse on language in education. [1] Conducted along various models, with languages introduced sequentially or simultaneously,[2] these strategies are based on certain assumptions on language in situations widely perceived as diglossic. They seek ways to make the best of arguably unfavourable circumstances, if not turning them around, by underscoring the cognitive advantages accrued to bilingual learners in 'post-colonial' classroom settings when all their languages enjoy (at least) some modicum of recognition in the school and societal environment verifying the saying that someone who knows only one language cannot understand even his own (in Finnegan 2007:27). It seems well established that, when pupils are allowed, if not encouraged, to interpret and negotiate knowledge in their medium (media) of choice different from the official MoI, and even when this remains at the oral level through code-switching, it helps them to make sense of concepts, construct meaning and thus scaffold learning..

Even where literacy in the home language is encouraged, the strategy is premised on the condition that the standard form of the dominant language will be taught and is the target. This makes sense. To be assimilated, school-induced knowledge needs to be secured, or stored, in the pupils' minds, and most likely this will occur in the dominant language. Since school manuals as well as exam papers, books and further references pupils can be confronted outside school, be it in the written media or the internet, they will reach themstudents in that same dominant language. In those circumstances, local languages have served to introduce the items of knowledge but will play little or no part in any further development.[3] These are all very welcome moves that need to be pursued and extended.

Translanguaging appears in that paradigm as one of the latest coined concepts to describe language practices, at both the global (group) and the bottom (individual) levels with altogether positive shades.

Translanguaging as a powerful descriptive concept

On the one hand translanguaging illustrates the perception that, in the young learners' minds, regardless of levels of fluency, formal boundaries between the several languages they have at their disposal are probably non-existent - until, as the case may be, they are reinforced by school and/or social interplay - and this obtains at both oral and written

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1 Literature is galore. For a short insight, see inter alia Hulmes (1989) for theoretical issues and the compilations by Hornberger (2002) and Garcia & al. (2006) for a selection of field experiences; for bilingual programs in Europe and Canada, see Armand et al. (2008), in the US, Reyes and Kleyn (2012).

2 For experiences in Africa, see Alidou & al., (2006) and Heugh (2007)

3 An illustration might be in order. Suppose a lesson on natural science - say, the habitat of the elephants - which, very appropriately in an African context, refers explicitly to local knowledge and terminology. The use of the local language has helped learners to understand the topic. But any further elaboration will occur in the dominant language only. One structured example of what can be done is Tourneux (2011)'s bilingual Fulfulde / French manual, which draws explicitly on local knowledge expressed through the local idiom.

levels (for instance Garcia & al. (2006:11); Mbodj-Pouye & Van der Avenne (2007) for spontaneous writing mixing French and Bambara in rural Mali).[1] On the other hand, the concept vividly captures the dynamics of the bi- or multi- lingual classroom and, beyond, of communicative events in postcolonial contexts, emphasizing the potent creativity involved. Central to its success, the concept is purposely devoid of any functional hierarchy among the languages present, whatever their degree of development and preferred domains of use, what Basu (2011:1311) calls "multifarious, allowing a rich interplay and exchange of cultural diversities" (see also Creese and Blackledge (2010:106) quoting Garcia, and Plüddeman (2011:10)). It implies a non-diglossic view of code-switching (Garcia (2006: 14) quoting Baker 2003) [2] even though this view remains in partly theoretical. Individuals operate at all times within a socio-historical context from which they cannot totally insulate themselves. Societal prejudices cannot be, or be entirely, bypassed or ignored. In fact they are usually assimilated and languages remain hierarchized in the mind of individuals, usually along their social functions. One at ease in chatting in a hybrid language knows very well that the same strategy would be suicidal in a CV or an academic essay.

On these premises, translanguaging appears as a very useful, maybe fundamental, addition to the sociolinguist's toolbox for describing, if not acting on, complex multilingual situations. In the multilingual classrooms, translanguaging undoubtedly makes pedagogical sense to scaffold learning of a dominant language used as official MoI, be it, with Africa in mind, Arabic, English, French or Portuguese, possibly Chinese in the future, among pupils having a local, low status, language as home language (see Chimbutane (2011: 100, 101) in reference to Portuguese in Mozambique).

However the very popularity of the concept in school situations may also have an impact detrimental to some of the very aims of its use as a palliative educational strategy. I look at potential implications a wide use of the term might entail, however much unintended they might be, not suggesting however in any way that its proponents support fully or partially these interpretations.

Translanguaging as a self-defeating strategy?

In the conclusion to their article, Garcia *et al.* (2006:15) building on Hornberger's continua of biliteracy, question 'whether schools will continue to protect literacy in standard languages' or (as the authors would favour) 'will begin to build on the flexible and multi-modal plurilingual literacy' that they see as a feature of today's world. They make it clear that plurilingual literacy does not equate to separate literacy in various languages and refer to it as hybridity. Due to its fashionable and somewhat ambiguous

1 When the languages have different writing systems, say French and Arabic, or English and Chinese, and both are taught alongside whether in state or community schools, this might well result in drawing a clearer line between the languages.

2 The term 'heteroglossia' also has its merits in contrast to diglossia (Creese & Blackledge 2010:106).

appeal[1] translanguaging has arguably become a new darling of the alternative discourse on language in education among many educationists and sociolinguists alike. It tends to assume a somewhat fluid meaning brought to cover all manners of linguistic interferences, from code-switching and code-mixing to lexical borrowings (for an example of such a given broad scope, see inter alia Chimbutane 2011: 101). Firstly, on an analytical perspective, this may be confusing. Drawing lines between the various phenomena involved is often helpful, even if boundaries are, as is often the case in human sciences, tenuous. But the real danger lies in the potential implications for education and language transmission if the advocated multiliteracy manifest in translanguaging practices somehow legitimates all such practices as equally valid, unless this is intended merely as a step in the learning process. This is presumably what triggers Plüdemann (2011: 10) to caution: "it [Translanguaging] is not a case of anything goes". Care in manipulating the concept is of the essence.

I argue that an unrestrained and unmonitored acceptance of any spontaneous linguistic practice in school, on the mere fact that it falls under the translanguaging canopy runs the risk of being counterproductive, defeating in particular the aim of language transmission for low status languages, as well as that of opening to the wider world. Applied to Kenya for instance, this view of multiliteracy would seemingly imply command *not* of Swahili and English literacies as two distinct systems but rather of a Sheng type of reading/ writing, possibly coloured by a third language if in a non-Swahili-dominant area.[2] Indeed, translanguaging practices as described above should not be the end of the story. This contention of course must be located within a conception of schools and learning and the two-fold function of language, both a medium and a matter.

Pedagogically sound though it may be, a learners-centred approach construed to suggest that one should be content with spontaneous linguistic practices and merely build on them without structured inputs from outside, has its limits. Languages, as much as maths or sciences, imply contents, whether this is acted on in language classes or elsewhere. Schools, as all will agree, are opportunities for the youth to learn.[3] In terms of language, this should include formal code(s) and register(s), not discounting the written norms when they exist. This seems little challenging for mainstream languages and after 15 odd years of schooling where a language features both as subject and MoI, the expectation of a reasonable academic level in most pupils is nothing preposterous.

Indeed, condoning, or even resorting to, translanguaging in the teaching process does not by any means make the knowledge of the standard form redundant. Nobody

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1 Translanguaging powerfully evokes hypothetic states in-between or beyond, which, for one reason or another, have become the new trend of our age. For some, it calls upon the sulphurous images of trans-genderness or trans-sexuality, for others, the no less suspicious, if more in the realm of ideas, notion of trans-nationality and the like.

2 Sheng, built on a junction of Swahili and English, designates the mixed language that pervades informal communication in Nairobi.

3 This is not to diminish their crucial function in socialization but this is not our concern here.

would seriously deny the unassailability of a sound knowledge of the dominant language(s) if the twin aims of fixing the various items of knowledge acquired in the classroom and opening pupils' horizons beyond the local context, enabling them to communicate with the wider world, are to be attained. Thus, in relation to special classes offered to English Language Learners in the US, Olmedo (2010:56) emphasizes very appropriately the educational importance of acquiring mainstream academic English: "the bilingual teacher must move beyond teaching only survival English to teaching academic language so that children can communicate". Titlestad (1998) made earlier the same argument for English in South Africa, albeit seemingly discounting altogether the country's African languages. And arguably, one main objective of L2 language classes in situations where that L2 is to become the MoI after an initial mother-tongue or L1 period is to give the learners as comprehensive a command of it as feasible, in both oral and written levels, to prepare them to use it effectively academically and gain access thereby to the modern and wider world. In fact, the pressure exerted by the vast amount of texts surfacing at all levels and in all forms in dominant languages, and their prevalence in the school journey of most African pupils, renders these languages relatively impervious to any immediate danger.

The question of the scope and depth of language knowledge arises however with a revenge in respect of dominated languages in countries of the global South particularly in Africa. Despite the good intentions of its proponents, translanguaging, posited as an acceptable end, might well result in dismissing local language mainstream forms by sidelining their teaching. Its suitability has to be examined carefully,

I look first at two associated aspects of translanguaging, its oral and local biases, before turning to what I see as some of its likely unfortunate consequences.

Translanguaging as an oral practice

A first consideration must be given to the fact that the type of linguistic competence implied by translanguaging seems commonly restricted to the oral domain, if only for practical reasons. In a school system that perceives literacy as the condition for learning (der Westhuizen 2009), this definitely marginalizes translanguaging.[1]

Inherent differences between the oral and written codes, speaking and listening on the one hand, and writing and reading on the other, in terms of production and interpretation of messages not to mention brain activity, cannot, much as we might want to, be evacuated, even without establishing a hierarchy between them. The former can be said to be innate, as all human beings are wired at birth to listen and speak, and this potential must be activated in the earliest stage of a child's life in order for the child to

1 The Unesco survey on literacy and education achievement illustrates the implicit equation between education and literacy (http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=201, accessed April 2012). For the sake of the argument, I take for granted the weight given to literacy even though the obsession for literacy and more broadly the education model itself should be questioned but this falls clearly beyond of the scope of this paper.

turn into a mature adult, while the latter is, or is not, acquired at a later stage, when one already has a command of oral language. In most, if not all cases, this acquisition implies formal teaching which, nowadays, is usually allocated to primary school, except in the case of adult literacy classes often meant as a catch-up mechanism.[1] The fact that writing in its several scripts was developed at certain periods of time among some communities but by all means not among all of them - Africa being par excellence the locus where orality proved particularly resilient - is sufficient evidence of its non-core nature relative to human existence.

It is commonsensical that literacy implies, even if it does not stop there, reading and writing, which in turn is reliant of the primary ability to decode and encode. Hornberger referred to (bi)literacy as "any instance in which communication occurs in or around writing" (in Garcia *et al.*, 2006:4). The ability to decode remains, due to the very nature of script, the unassailable foundation upon which literacy is construed. This reading of literacy will undergird the following discussion.

One practical difference between the two codes has a huge implication here. Contrary to speech forms, it is no easy feat to produce a sustained text written in more than one code.[2] One has to decide which spelling conventions to follow. In that context translanguaging is therefore eminently writing-unfriendly.

Translanguaging as a localised practice

Translanguaging is extremely sensitive to local circumstances, as a plethora of examples in the literature suggest. For instance, interactions in British complementary schools, where children come after hours and learn their 'heritage' language, as described by Creese & Blackridge (2010), are telling. Command of either English or the particular language is not enough to ensure understanding: "both languages are needed simultaneously to convey the information" note Creese & Blackridge (2010:108). The same goes for a "blending of English and Cantonese" in Hong-Kong secondary schools about which Pennington (1998: 28) comments "... it could not be understood by anyone other than a bilingual".[3] Each situation is specific in the particulars of the languages in contact and their respective weight. Translanguaging thus creates insider codes, only accessible to members of the various local or, rather, localised, communities. Arguably, and critically, one could contend that it might only create a hotchpotch of new gibberishes. And, in the absence of stable varieties to anchor them, each translanguaged

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1 Definitions of literacy depend on the social circumstances in which literacy is envisaged. Graff (1987a & b) discusses extensively what is meant by literacy and details its gradual extension in Europe where in the Middle Ages, reading and writing were perceived and developed as different abilities.

2 For a contrario example, see below.

3 Further examples in Garcia et al. (2006:13)

speech-form may fast diverge internally to an extent that intelligibility may be threatened over time and space.[1]

These two features combine to drastically limit the scope of these purported new literacies. When they occur, that is, in instances when such mixed languages are written, the texts convey socially relevant information rather than abstract or academic knowledge. This is illustrated in the new modes of communication (internet, sms, etc), which Garcia *et al.* (2006:11) allude to. Indeed sms or chat messages emanating from multilinguals often offer a fascinating branding of linguistic codes, disregarding in the same time conventional spelling and using near phonetic transcriptions (or symbols, etc), to an extent they may be impenetrable to one unfamiliar with local cultural references and speech habits. It is easy indeed to observe that academics, even those who have embarked on the translanguaging wagon to paraphrase Plüddemann (2011), keep well clear in their own writing of any form of heteroglossia. The pressure of academic journals' editors of course may play a part, but their attitude bears a strong rationale. They are too conscious that their potential circulation would be drastically limited, defeating their main purpose. In that sense at least, they do not seem to align their own practices on what they seemingly preach.

Translanguaging as a springboard for language and cultural shift in the South?

Even in a framework condoning code-switching rather than banning it, there is a serious risk that local languages purely serve as a transitional tool - help pupils in acquiring school knowledge basically expressed in forms approximating, or mimicking, the dominant language used as MoI - and play no part in any further development. This may be better than having local languages being shunted altogether, but it further entrenches the existing hierarchy between languages, making local ones more or less disposable in the long run.[2]

Translanguaging may add to these woes if it results in legitimizing constant and *ad libitum* borrowing at all levels much beyond inevitable technical terminology to include everyday terms and expressions, as a valid form of expression in school and hence in formal domains. It is already the case that low status languages are losing ground constantly, with the dominant ones – in Africa usually if not exclusively the former colonial media, especially English[3] – securing the lion's share in terms of domains and frequency of use in a glottophagic manner, as can be observed in spontaneous speech.

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1 SA urban varieties of African languages, which can be seen as examples of such mixed codes and include the various tsotsitaals, always betray (to the informed ears at least) their geographical origin. Even varieties that emerged in the same socio-political context, such as Gauteng tsotsitaals, may well become unintelligible to one another.

2 In SA, this prompted calls for the use of African languages beyond the first years of schooling to secondary and even tertiary education (see Langtag's report, Alexander 1996).

3 Swahili in Tanzania and Kenya (Jones 2011), Shona in Zimbabwe (Nyika 2008) are examples of African indigenous languages that which could be posited as dominant in relation to others, minorized in those countries.

One must be weary of the sirens of new talk. Translanguaging may contribute further to the demise of local languages as fully-fledged idioms in Africa.

That brings about the issue of what is implied by knowing a language. I advocate equality of expectations, regardless of the respective status of the languages, inasmuch as the situation allows.

Kramsch (2006:119 in Hélot 2008:76) very convincingly observes that proficiency emanating from second languages learnt in school and proficiency in a home language in the post-colonial period, touch different cords, the first one being more academically oriented, the latter being centrally social and emotional: "a bi- or multi-lingual subject is not necessarily the person who speaks many languages with equal mastery …, but rather someone who … has a more acute awareness than usual of the social, cultural and emotional contexts in which his/her various languages have grown and the life experiences they evoke". People culture-switch as much as they code-switch, as Lopes (2004:123) very aptly put it, even if this, by the very nature of cultural practices, tend to remain located at the level of discourse.[1] And indeed research has shown the resilience of ethnic identity even in case of language gradual loss (for South Africa, *inter alia* Rudwick, 2004; Nongogo 2007). However, due to simultaneous changes in social status among so-called elite children, even the cultural awareness alluded to above might evaporate with time, engendering a societal gap. In South Africa for instance, Mckinney (2011: 21, note 6 remarks that the more affluent a school, the higher the fees, the higher the proportion of (black) learners claiming English as their home language. Indeed, for what they perceive as the best interest of their offspring, some African parents are forsaking their own idiom and, by way of consequence, whether they acknowledge it or not, the cultural wealth it carries.

For there is more to language use than informal conversation to show empathy, ethnic positioning or attitudes. It is also, and, I would contend, primarily, about linguistic ability. The sociolinguistic focus on attitudes - emphasizing that language is no determining criteria for cultural or ethnic belonging, as illustrated for black 'elite' school-going youth by Mckinney (op. cit.) - can also be viewed as an avoidance strategy in situations akin to linguistic defeat, if one can call it that: 'we failed to learn our languages, our command of them is embryonic and purely oral regardless of any previous literary achievement and of their status in the country, but our claims of ethnic belonging remain valid for the mere reason that *we* make them'.[2] This I contend is essentially an

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1 Baetens Beardsmore (1989:279) notes for instance that "it is difficult for Islamic immigrants in Scandinavia to belong integrally to both the immigrant community and the host community peoples".

2 We are not implying that this outcome is from the youth's own making. Parents, as agents of their own linguistic destiny and that of their progeny (see Py 2007, Ndhlovu 2010, Qorro 2009), bear an important responsibility by their language practices in the home, with lack of intergenerational transmission a causal factor, as Extra & Gorter (2008:9) pointed out for regional languages in Europe, and attitudes towards language in education and school policies. Still, grown-up youth might not mind it as much as one would want them to.

opportunistic strategy to explain away language loss in situations where hegemony rules, as revealed when contrasted to situations prevailing in the West, even if differences between the two contexts constrain the comparison. French (say) out-of-school youth unable to read or produce a text in correct French are still French (of course) but are widely deemed inadequate to operate appropriately in France (or another French-speaking region or country) and the same goes in countries with national languages of much lesser extent such as Luxembourg (see also further down), Romania, Finland and the Scandinavian countries, to name but a few. Academic mastery of, say, English (or Russian in another era) does not compensate this dearth by a long shot. Of course, the issue falls back in part to the debate on language and the nation. In most African countries the ex-colonial language has official status and country-wide extension while local languages accepted as 'national' languages, often regionally based, remain political minors in spite of their numerical majority.[1] The identity angle in the comparison is possibly more compelling. Would (say) a youth from Alsatian, Welsh or Catalan background claim to belong to the respective ethnic communities should she/he not have decent command of the language? In all likelihood, such individuals would rather claim French, German, etc, identity, as the case may be. In Africa, claims to ethnic identities remain strong even with at most limited oral competence in the (claimed) ethnic tongue. Conversely to the situation in the West, the knowledge of the ethnic language is somehow perceived as secondary or even irrelevant.[2]

Given the tremendous ideological and social pressure presently at work on anything deemed local and hence (allegedly) unworthy of scholarly interest, the uncritical acceptance of multiliteracies and the subsequent call for plurilingual literacy to become the exclusive target of the school curriculum on the ground that it is mixed codes that people use (see Stroud 2003), without proper and thorough teaching of the local languages for their own sake, is a clear recipe for a dramatic linguistic shift which would see African languages gradually disappear, or melt away, in a process remindful of creolisation.[3] The writings are on the wall.[1] Should it not trigger reaction? Can we attend

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1 South Africa is one of the few countries where ex-colonial languages and (some) local ones share the same rank in the Constitution, even though this has largely failed to bring forth the expected changes (see inter alia Alexander 2000; Heugh 2002; Cook, 2008; Lafon 2012).

2 It is a common trend in the literature to distinguish, among African youths, claims of identity from language fluency and to posit multiple and variable identities in any one individual. I do not dispute multiple identities but query the logics of treating differently the two contexts. A youth's claim to what can be called a 'modern' identity will be deemed validated by western education and fluency in English or French but no same criteria applies for his claim to an African ethnic identity.

3 I adhere to Mufwene's view that creolisation is a social process rather than a particular evolution in languages. In that light, New World (so-called) creoles are nothing else than neo-roman languages and in fact no languages should be so qualified (see Mufwene (2007) for an articulated exposé). I will therefore refrain, tempting as it might be, from labelling as such the mixed forms whereby African languages are saturated with words and expressions 'borrowed' from other tongues.

to the patient before it lies on its death-bed? Or shall we react only when languages have become endangered to the extent that they are on the brink of extinction? This needs careful consideration.

African languages-based 'creoles' that emerged in the West Indies and the Indian Ocean islands, are, lest one should forget, the offspring of slavery, whereby people were violently uprooted from within their own groups and thrown into the jungle of the plantation economy, deprived of basic rights, turned into tools for production and occasionally sex objects. The harsh material and human conditions they were condemned to led them to forge new identities, drawing from memories of their previous experiences while assimilating per force into their imposed circumstances. 'Creoles' languages, pegged on imitations of the masters' idioms, were borne out of these most painful experiences. Now that the overall political situation has changed and countries and people in Africa are (nominally) in charge of their destiny, a repetition of what occurred in times of bondage would be a tragic paradox, entrenching and possibly completing the cultural domination of the continent (and of many other areas of the world) by the West initiated centuries ago with Christianization and colonization.[2]

Already hit at its heart by rampant urbanisation and a continuous rural exodus, and further challenged by the progress of universal education, transmission of 'traditional' knowledge and wisdom in Africa through oral interaction of the youth with adult members of their speech community is marginalized and fast disappearing, as are formal oral skills since social conditions necessary for their production rarefy. [3] This might have the (unwanted?) consequence of shutting up bodies of knowledge in the various cultures.[4]

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1 One needs discipline and/or will to maintain several languages a par in one's practices. If I may bring my experience, not implying though that my own limitations are nothing but personal. Brought up in France monolingually (although my mother was herself a native speaker of Berber), I did all my schooling, university included, in French. I learnt English as a second language in school and acquired near fluency through youth exchange programmes, travels and readings. When I was posted in Southern Africa in 1992, English became my main working language while I undertook to learn the main idioms of my new environment – Shona, Portuguese, later Zulu. After some time, I observed that I was using English, or a heavily and unnecessarily Englishized French, to communicate with French-speaking colleagues or friends, as words and expressions in French would fail me. I decided to react and made it a point to try and address them in proper French henceforward. I also nurtured opportunities to read and write in French. I was delighted to see that after a while my fluency in French, both spoken and written improved, even though I have never to date fully recovered spelling or the use of some idiomatic expressions. But should I not have reacted I would certainly have lost a certain level of fluency. As for Berber, it has but disappeared at the level of my generation (in me, my siblings and cousins).

2 Mufwene would most probably qualify the phenomena as the culmination of the Indo-European linguistic and cultural expansion incepted millennia ago....

3 Finnegan (2007:114 & seq) observes that the production of oral literature depend of the social context; some are part and parcel of special events which need longish preparation, others less so but are inserted in life routines. This may not obtain anymore in present-day urban lives.

4 Knowledge is to be intended here in a broad sense, that includes not only knowledge of technics and the group's history and beliefs, but expected social behaviours, etc. S Platiel has shown for instance how folktales subtly teach young ones how to behave.

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As learners lack the linguistic tools to access them in, or through, what would have become at best to them mere 'heritage languages', restricted to the family circle, their availability to inform their worldview, develop conceptualisation and, in a school perspective, reshape contents of various disciplines, is compromised. Besides school failure[1] this can only lead to the further homogenisation of thought along western paradigms. As bearers of culture, languages also have the capacity to inform the paradigms pertaining to human sciences and the ubiquitous development discourse. Their 'intellectualisation'[2], if it is ever to materialize, needs to be rooted in genuine expressions otherwise the languages will become servile channels for an alien discourse. In such circumstances, alluring though this may appear to the sociolinguistically minded, legitimizing translanguaging practices in African situations while disregarding standard or classical forms of local idioms seem likely to pave the way to the dominance of (mostly) English and a western (mostly Anglo-Saxon) ontology. This linguistic and cultural auto-da-fe will give further momentum to the homogenisation on western lines and could be fatal to non-western languages and cultures.

One must not be naïve. The apparently innocuous call to let languages evolve unmonitored, together with the pedagogically sound focus on 'modern' speech forms, imply, like most superficial pro-educational discourse, assimilation into Western culture.[3] Buttressed on the indisputable notion that cultures evolve, proponents of the western view have it that this evolution should follow the western script, hence forward presumed to have overcome its localized origin and become emblematic of modernity. Individuals from non-western cultures are, therefore, expected to renounce them willingly.[4] This is nothing short of "cognitive imperialism" notes Basu (2011:1310, 1328) about native Canadian Aboriginals: "Underlying hegemonic notions of universality (...) render in turn a homogeneous conception of integration that more often leads to assimilationist views".

Already, it is clear that development goals, framed as they are in an alien language outside the relevant countries with no significant local input adhere to a western agenda. For example, the communitarian orientation and the notion of the "the interdependence of all phenomena" (Odora Hoppers 2002:83), so deeply rooted in African value systems, are prevented to dictate as they should both the goals and the means (see Hulmes 1989:107 &

1 A Canadian report acknowledged that "the exclusion of the experiences, values and viewpoints of Aboriginal, racial and ethnocultural minority groups constitutes a systemic barrier to success for students from those groups" (in Basu 2011:1309).

2 Alexander (2003) calls for the 'intellectualisation' of African languages, viz. their use in prestige domains, most importantly, in writing. If we accept the early literary development of some of them as a first phase in their intellectualisation, one could speak of re-intellectualisation. Also Prah (2009).

3 In SA, Evans (2010: 143) argues that the use of English as MoI triggers in African learners a shift from community to Western individualistic values.

4 An easy illustration comes in respect of the position of girls and women in society. The Western worldview that glorifies the (alleged) free choice of the individual is largely pre-empted and any option different is deemed archaic, or imposed, etc.

seq). Odora Hoppers (2002:78) thus speaks of "development paradigms (...) which transmogrified billions of the world's majority into an inverted mirror of western identity, a mirror that belittled them and sent them 'to the back of the queue', a mirror that defined their new identity". This is reinforced by the indiscriminate use of (mostly) English by the nebula of development actors in Africa which exacerbates the gap (Prah 2011) and dominates even when there is a reasonably accessible alternative. In Tanzania, as Maral-Hanak (2011:89 & seq.) points out, Swahili is spoken by nearly all inhabitants and has courses readily available for non-speakers but still has not become the common working language for expatriate development practitioners. This arrogant attitude has a negative impact in terms of practical achievements whenever access to the discourse itself is hampered by language.

Local indigenous languages, the open sesame to cultural troves

But it is not all gloom and doom. There is matter for hope if the full transmission of languages remains effective.

Significant amounts of cultural data are available. On the one hand, oral literature, even in its classic forms, is still practised in some reaches of the continent at some occasions and it might still be possible to collect genuine information, if only, as Adegoju (2008:29) makes the call for Nigeria, local linguists and academics would care to turn their interest to oral uses of language. On the other, in the last centuries or decades, huge compilations have been collected by, or at the instigation of, European missionaries, civil servants or academics.[1] More recently, some ethnic or cultural groups have been object of study and feature in academic compendium, not to discount the impact of radios on language maintenance and preservation.[2] Regardless of the source, though, the use of local language guarantees a degree of truthfulness to the original, even if the reliability of the data needs to be critically checked in the light of the agent's own agenda.[3] But that would still be an advantage over total ignorance or accessing this body of knowledge through the dominant media. Translation often implies adaptation away from the original (see Finnegan 2007:158 & seq; Lewandoski 2012 for an illustration in Burkina school system).

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1 Only in privileged cases – such as languages early developed by 'progressive' missions - do we have ethnologic and/historic texts authored from within the communities. In West Africa, this started from the early 1900ies, with the prominent cases of Ghana (Gold Coast) and Nigeria with the 'onitsha' literature; in Southern Africa, slightly later with the likes of Motsamai, Fuze, Jabavu, Plaatje, Dube, etc (see Couzens 2003; Ndletyana 2008),

2 Lekgoathi (2012) shows that the creation of Ndebele radio by the apartheid state far outplayed its political agenda to develop a language that had hardly been committed to writing previously; this enabled local agency with the emergence of an active group of 'ethno-preneurs' (Lekgoathi 2012:64). See also Fardon & Furniss (2000) for similar view at the continental level.

3 Censorship by missionaries press which in the early period were vital to publication is easy to establish: as a rule, they prohibited overt political criticism and excised sexual elements (Maake 1992, 2000; Mphahlele 2004); the conscious or unconscious intervention of the compiler or recorder is more difficult to assess.

Unimpeded access to the community's cultural wealth is premised on the mastery of the languages and language registers the data is couched in, and hence, in language transmission. In it lies the hope of fostering continuity with the past, so as to ensure a smoother transition to modernity, worked from within rather than imposed from the outside. In this time of protracted formal education meant to reach all and sunder and ranking high in national and international agendas,[1] school stands out as of paramount importance. They are probably the only locus whence a counteroffensive can be mounted. This is urgent. Languages change fast, especially when they are not maintained by rigorous oral learning and/or standard written practices. Already records in African languages of the previous century often appear to contemporary untrained ears already archaic, almost akin to dead languages, as is the case of praise poetry or even literature in present-day South African languages dating back to no further than late 19th or early 20th century.[2]

To counterbalance the mixed and altered (adulterated) forms now prevailing and glorified under translanguaging, in a language and culture transmission perspective, African languages should be extensively taught and learnt in schools across the continent. The focus should be placed on their past achievements in formal oracy, accessed directly or through its records (or both combined) (for Southern African examples, Ntuli & Pretorius, 2005; Haire & Matjila, 2008; Mutasa & al., 2008), not discounting written literature - which is not as infrequent as it is made to seem (see Ricard 2004). The languages should be taught in a critical fashion *à la Giroux* (in Stoud 2003:30 and Ngwenya 2006 for isiZulu), as a safeguard against linguistic purism and cultural conservatism for their own sake. Preservation of old forms and norms and moralistic behaviour should not be assumed to follow automatically from the recall of languages and traditions. It is in any case counter-productive.[3] It probably does not matter so much whether local languages are used as medium of instruction after the first three years or so, or merely taught as subject as long as they are significantly and meaningfully present in the school, in a dispensation which would most likely be bi- or multi-lingual.[4] That will

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1 Jomtien 1990 has signalled a move towards universal (primary) education, and primary education has significantly expanded in most African countries (see Pôle de Dakar, EFA report 2007).

2 In contrast, French classical authors or philosophers of the 17th century Enlightenment can be (or are expected to be) accessed in the original text by school graduates. This was illustrated by the recent outburst when the French president N. Sarkozy lambasted the inclusion of a trend-setting novel (La Princesse de Clèves, 1678) in a recruitment test for low to medium level administrative positions (http://www.liberation.fr/tribune/010166942-la-princesse-de-cleves-au-karcher) .

3 I leave the debate on the validity of the identification of what are presently considered as separate languages as well as the genuine character of so-called standard forms, raised for instance by Makoni (2003, 2011) in relation to Southern Africa, for another opportunity (also Herbert 2001:224 & seq). Regardless of one's position in the matter, though, it remains that a command of these registers is required to access the bodies of genuine indigenous lore compiled in the past. A critical approach to them in any case would go a long way to overcome this debate.

4 The example of the tiny Duchy of Luxemburg, squeezed between France, Belgium, Holland and Germany might provide food for thought. The local vernacular, Luxemburger, serves as MoI in the first years to be replaced by

allow to bring more "of the outside in", to paraphrase Lytra (2010). On a societal level, the positive impact of the use of local languages is illustrated by the Malawian radio station *Nkhani Zam'maboma*, "News from Districts". It enabled non-school educated people to question development goals and 'unfriendly' attitudes of officials and bosses from government, NGOs and companies, asserting their own views through using idioms that prioritize the community rather than espousing a Western individual rights perspective (http://africa research institute . org / podcasts – article .php ?i=FALQHJSWQP&p=1).

The unique advantage that flows from overall fluency in local languages should, therefore, be emphasized and recognized, that is, fully credited for, in school systems. Obviously, schools alone cannot save indigenous languages, as Hornberger's recent compilation reminds us (see Edwards 2011) but it does not follow that school and education authorities should desist altogether from a language management friendly to local idioms. There is need to get the ball rolling. If such a policy lasts, showing the authorities' determination, the move may well be taken up by society at large, endowing the languages with symbolic value and turning them into sought-for intellectual capital, possibly rewarded in terms of jobs (see Armand & al. 2008: 57). In Mozambique for instance, in spite of its modest coverage, a bilingual educational programme in place since the beginning of the 21st century significantly altered discourse, perceptions and possibly attitudes regarding local languages, remapping the country as diversely multilingual after a history of denial (Chimbutane, 2011 & 2012; Lafon 2008, 2011, 2012).

Conclusion

Intervening in a debate on the need for African centres in present day SA universities, Nigerian academic Garuba (who holds a prestigious position at UCT) observed: "we need to remind ourselves that the struggle against marginalisation and objectification within the domain of knowledge is not simply a struggle for seamless integration (...). It is more fundamentally a struggle for epistemological decolonisation" (http://mg.co.za/article/2011-03-25-the-ghetto-in-ivory-tower)

Garuba's comment applies equally to language, as emphasized by Prah (2009:85): "This perception of neo-colonialism at the level of language and literacy, i. e. in a cultural sense, is a greatly underestimated factor. The consequences are however vast and developmentally crippling." Leaving local languages to the home and the street by giving precedence to hybrid translanguaging practices in school may, in the best of hypothesis, allow for their continued existence for the time being at least (Mesthrie 2008) but will

German (with which it bears significant similarity) before the function is handed over to French in secondary school (Baetens Beardsmore 1989: 278; Gerald Stel, personal comm. April 2012), Luxemburger remaining an optional subject.

undoubtedly result in the loss of formal registers and eventually lead to a drastic disruption with the past. If we want cultural transmission to continue in its bewildering diversity, as it did during millennia of human occupation of the planet, it is of utmost importance to ensure continued full linguistic transmission. Only thus will knowledge and wisdom gathered in the past by so many communities remain accessible to the new generations, available to inform and possibly shape their, and their children's, future. In Africa this implies that schools' curricula include the standard forms of local languages and their literary varieties which have become the repository of cultural records and that societies start giving them pride of place alongside, as the case may be, other languages and other values.

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